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Small Business Assistance Helps Put Entrepreneur on the Road to Success

HURRICANE - Following a lay-off by Nisource (Columbia Gas), 20-year veteran Richard Shell tirelessly searched the Internet before finding the right franchise opportunity. Once he determined the type of business would best suit his entrepreneurial desire, he turned to the West Virginia Small Business Development Center (WWSBDC) for the technical assistance to make his dream a reality.

Directed by Conley Salyer since 2001, the WWSBDC, partially funded by the Small Business Administration (SBA), comprises 12 satellite offices on the campuses of community and technical colleges throughout West Virginia and two located at Region One Workforce Investment Boards in Beckley and Summersville. The SBA is a federal government agency which helps maintain and strengthen the nation's economy by aiding, counseling, assisting and protecting the interests of small businesses. SBDC's and SCORE, "Counselors to America's Small Business," are valuable SBA resource partners who provide counseling services and management assistance, free of charge in most instances, to current and prospective small business owners.

Facing many difficulties with a positive outlook has been the secret to success for Shell and his Budget Blinds franchise in Hurricane, West Virginia. "I always had a fire in my belly to do something," exclaimed Shell. The opportunity came after a job displacement. "I began searching the Internet for franchise opportunities and found Budget Blinds."

After discovering a franchise that would combine his love of helping people with his home improvement experience, Shell sought help from a number of sources. First, he turned to the WORKFORCE West Virginia Center in Hurricane. At their recommendation, he attended a business planning seminar at Unlimited Future, Inc. (UFI) in Huntington. Ultimately, UFI referred Shell to Amber Wilson and Edna McClain, business analyst and center manager, respectively for the Marshall Community & Technical College SBDC also in Huntington. Working with McClain and Wilson, he received financial advice and business assistance. "They looked over my financial documents and helped with a business plan," explained Shell. Faced with financing challenges, McClain directed Shell to Lightstone Community Development Corporation. "Conventional financing was not available to me. I worked with the Lightstone CDC and received a \$35,000 loan through their SBA microloan program," he said. In addition, Wilson assisted Shell with obtaining a \$15,000 UFI-WWSBDC microloan.

Together, the team at the Marshall Community & Technical College SBDC helped jumpstart Shell's business. Working out of his van, Shell offers custom window treatments such as draperies, fabric blinds, valances, wood blinds and shutters. His enthusiasm for his products quickly spreads to his customers. "I saw one of Richard's yard signs and looked at one of my neighbor's blinds that Richard had installed. I called and Richard gave good pricing, much better than JC Penney's," says Joyce Cumpston, one of Shell's customers. People like Cumpston are what motivate Shell. "I love what I'm doing. It's not the same drudgery. People are what make me go," he says.

With a realtor referral program, door-to-door canvassing and promotional signs, Budget Blinds has grown quickly. In fact, Shell has hired an installer who will become his business partner. With an MBA and a solid business background, Shell says, "I am focusing on my strengths like advertising, marketing and sales." Since he owns the only Budget Blinds franchise in West Virginia, he hopes to increase his territory and conduct his operations from a central location. For now, the delight in the eyes of customers like Cumpston proves that Shell is on the road to business success.

For more information on the SBA and the resources available to assist small business, contact the West Virginia District Office at 800-767-8052 ext. 8 or by email at wvinfo@sba.gov, or visit them on the web at www.sba.gov/wv.